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United States House of Representatives

Tribal Self-Governance

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Chairman Pombo, Ranking Member Rahall, Members of the Committee and distinguished guests, on behalf of President Joni M. Ramos and Vice President Leonard Rivers of the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community (Community), we thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Jacob Moore, Special Assistant on Congressional & Legislative Affairs. I am here to share with the Committee the concept of self-governance, some of the successes resulting therefrom and to emphasize the importance of Section 134 of S. 1391, the Senate Interior Appropriations bill.

Our Community, currently comprised of over 8,300 members, predates Arizona as a State. Yet, in the last 50 years, urban growth has come to our boundaries forcing the Community to explore ways to protect our history, culture and way of life. Today, we are surrounded by metropolitan Phoenix and are bordered by the cities of Tempe, Scottsdale, Mesa and Fountain Hills.

The Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community is a contemporary but still traditional community that is concerned about our physical, social, economic and spiritual well-being. We are fortunate that our Community recognizes the importance of planning for a world that the next seven generations of our people will inherit. The advantage of long-term planning enables us to make better decisions.

Our road to self-governance began at the same time President Richard Nixon launched self-determination in 1970. That action, as you know, led to the Indian Self-Determination & Educational Assistance Act of 1975. We entered into our first contract in 1970 for our Police Department. This initiative set us on track for self-determination and self-governance. Since that initial contract, we have grown to be an active and strong self-governing tribe and enjoy a reputation, as such, among our peers.

In the 1980s, we were the first tribe to develop a major retail development on our land. To accomplish this, we brought together more than 300 landowners and a developer and created the Pavilions Shopping Center. We could not have done this without the opportunities available under the Indian Self-Determination and Educational Assistance Act.

Subsequently, as a part of self-governance, we have taken over management of our own resources. We have established a realty database and a compatible geographic information system. As a result, we can track ownership for every fractionated piece of land owned by heirs of original allottees and tribally owned lands. We can show landowners exactly where their land is and provide a current inventory of their land interests on the same day of the request. Equally significant, we issue lease payment checks to our members in a timely and accurate manner.

Under the spirit and intent of self-governance, we have expanded our economic development opportunities. The Salt River Indian Pima-Maricopa Indian Community operates 11 successful enterprises that include such diverse industries as construction materials, telecommunications, entertainment, tourism, waste management and commercial property development. The revenues realized from these enterprises allow us to supplement the limited resources received from the federal government toward fulfilling its trust obligations. Even with additional tribal funds, there is still an unmet need in the delivery of basic services and infrastructure in Indian Country including the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community.

Today, we have more than three decades of experience with self-governance. From the original 10 demonstration projects in 1987, the program has grown to over 260 tribes that are participating in self-governance in one form or another.

Self-governance has proven to be a viable means to allow tribes to obtain more autonomy in decision-making and management of their resources. Self-governance allows tribes to develop and grow in a way that is consistent with traditional values and cultural integrity. The self-governance program allows tribes the flexibility to utilize and maximize limited federal resources in the most efficient and cost-effective way. While accomplishing all of this, self-governance tribes have met, and often times exceeded, the level of trust accountability practiced by the U.S. Department of the Interior. This is evidenced in successful annual audit reports, the EDS report, and the DOI's As Is Report.

In the context of the current trust reform effort and the U.S. Department of the Interior's reorganization plan, we need to ensure that the embodiment of self-governance is not diminished. Since the trust reform plan has focused primarily on issues involving direct service tribes and self-determination contract tribes, as distinguished from self-governance tribes, self-governance tribes must be able to continue to operate within the parameter that has guided their success.

The demonstration project proposed under Section 134 will allow current self-governance tribes to continue to operate under a system that has proven successful while allowing trust reform to continue. The Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community has always, and will continue to maintain, trust standards that meet or exceed those of the federal government. Much like the empowerment realized under self-governance, our trust standards reflect our commitment to the well-being and continued existence of our Community.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

Follow-up Contact Information

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